

AMENDMENTS TO THE SPECIFICATION

Please amend the following portions of the specification as follows:

(1) Please amend paragraph [0055] as follows:

[0055] As shown in FIGS. 15, 15A and 15B, the fasteners 200A, 200B are a solid, or alternatively, hollow member having a substantially ball shape. FIG 15 illustrates an isometric view of a spherical fastener 200A, while FIG. 15A illustrates a cross section view of the fastener 200A in FIG. 15 taken along Line 15A-15A. FIG. 15B illustrates a cross section view of a fastener 200B similar to the fastener 200A in FIG 15A, but where the opening 216B of the fastener 200B has been altered to include a cylindrical opening 216B having a countersink. FIGS. 15C and 15D illustrate alternative embodiments of the fasteners 200A and 200B in FIGS. 15A and 15B, respectively, but are illustrated as fasteners 200C and 200D manufactured from plastic. For simplicity, the following discussion references only fasteners 200A and 200B, but it is understood that the discussion respectively applies to fasteners 200C and 200D, notwithstanding construction materials. Both fasteners 200A, 200B respectively include a first hemispheroidal portion 212A, 212B (i.e., a first engaging portion 212A, 212B) for engaging a picket (e.g., picket 44), and a second hemispheroidal portion 214A, 214B (i.e., a mating portion 214A, 214B) for engaging a second article, such as a rail 48 to which the picket 44 is to be attached. For both fasteners 200A, 200B, a top surface 218A, 218B and an opposite bottom surface 220A, 220B are substantially flat or truncated, to facilitate ease of placement and assembly onto a facing surface of an item, e.g., a rail 48. The fasteners 200A, 200B are desirably fabricated as a single piece of a uniform material for ease of fabrication. Exemplary materials include nylon, plastic, polyvinyl chloride, and other deformable materials including but not

limited to synthetic rubber and polyurethane. The fasteners 200A, 200B preferably include a first set of ridges 211A, ~~211B~~, respectively, disposed on an exterior surface of the first portion 212A, 212B or first engaging portion 212A, 212B thereof, for use in frictionally engaging an interior surface of a cylindrical opening provided in a longitudinal end of a picket or baluster 44. The maximum dimensions of the ridges of the fasteners 200A, 200B are preferably selected to be slightly larger than the internal dimensions of the opening in the picket 44, e.g., by an amount on the order of hundredths of an inch along the diameter of the ridges, such that the ridges frictionally engage the interior surface of the opening in the picket 44 and stay engaged despite stresses that the assembled rail 48 and picket 44 may encounter later. In such case, the fasteners 200A, 200B and/or the ridges 211A, ~~211B~~ are fabricated of a material and thickness such that some deformation of the ridges and/or the underlying ball occurs upon inserting the fasteners 200A, 200B into the opening of the picket 44. FIG. 21 illustrates a cross-sectional close-up view of fastener 200B shown in FIG. 15B employed in a connected assembly.

(2) Please amend paragraph [0056] as follows:

[0056] The fasteners 200A, 200B are also provided with a second portion 214A, 214B having a second set of ridges 213A, ~~213B~~ used to frictionally engage an interior surface of an opening in another member to which the picket is joined, for example, a rail of a railing. The ridges 213A, ~~213B~~ of the second set are desirably slanted in the opposite direction from, but directed towards, the ridges 211A, ~~211B~~ of the first set such that the ridges 213A, ~~213B~~ frictionally engage a first opening in one item, e.g. a rail, while ridges 211A, ~~211B~~ frictionally engage an opening in another item, e.g. a picket.

(3) Please amend paragraph [0057] as follows:

[0057] A stop ~~222A₁, 222A₂, 222B₁, 222B₂~~ may be provided on the exterior surface of the fasteners 200A, 200B between in either or both the first portion 212A, 212B and second portion 214A, 214B, for use in stopping the fastener 200A, 200B from being inserted too deeply into one or the other of the picket and the rail to which it is being joined. As illustrated, maximum diameter ridges ~~the stop 222A, 222B 222A₁, 222A₂, 222B₁, 222B₂~~ may simply be the ridges 211A, ~~211B~~, 213A, ~~213B~~ of either or both the first and second portions 212A, 212B, 214A, 214B having the outermost diameters, i.e., the ridges ~~211A, 211B, 213A, 213B~~ having the largest diameters when compared to others of the ridges. As may be clearly seen from FIGURES 15, 15A and 15B, in some embodiments, these outermost ridges 222A, 222B 222A₁, 222A₂, 222B₁, 222B₂ ~~may do not function strictly as a positive stop, but rather simply provide~~ the maximum ridge diameter for either or both portions 212A, 212B, 214A, 214B of the fastener 200A, 200B to engage their respective items (e.g., a picket or a rail). As can be seen in FIGURES 15A and 15B, the first and second hemispheroidal portions are symmetrical in construction to one another about their plane of opposition (illustrated by the lines separating the first portions 212A, 212B from the second portions 214A, 214B). While the fasteners 200A, 200B are desirably fabricated in one piece and of uniform material throughout, the first and second portions 212A, 212B, 214A, 214B, or other components of fasteners 200A, 200B may be constructed of different materials or different pieces of the same or similar materials and then assembled to make the fastener.

(4) Please amend paragraph [0058] as follows:

[0058] The fastener ~~fasteners 200A, 200B~~ is preferably provided with an aperture 216A, ~~216B~~ on at least one end thereof, the aperture 216A ~~optionally~~ being sized and shaped to accommodate standard-sized tools such as those of rectangular cross-section (opening 216A in FIG. 15A), e.g. a rectangular nut driver or socket wrench, or those having other cross-sections, e.g. hexagonal drivers, also known as "Allen" wrenches, for example. In such case, the aperture 216A provides a way of applying torque to insert a lower portion 214A of the fastener 200A into an item such as a rail.